What did one or more of the following contribute to the cultural revival during the period 1870 to 1914: the GAA; the Gaelic League; The Anglo-Irish literary revival? (2012)

It is undeniable that the GAA, the Gaelic League and the Anglo-Irish Literary Revival all contributed hugely to the cultural revival of the 19th and 20th centuries. Up until that point, many Irish people had begun to abandon Irish customs, traditions and games in favour of the “more civilised” English alternatives. The Irish language itself having been hit badly by the famine and consequent immigration, was in decline. The stigma surrounding the language was only pushing it further towards extinction. During this period, several sought to save, preserve and in the case of the literary revival, establish Irish culture and language. The people who spearheaded these movements, such as Michael Cusack, Douglas Hyde and WB Yeats, were sick of the intricacies of politics in Westminster and thus started a cultural revolution instead. In doing so, they promoted cultural nationalism, a wide movement which aimed to preserve Irish heritage, art, music, history, language, literature and sports. While at the surface these organisations appeared to be apolitical, many involved felt that establishing and defining a distinct Irish culture would help their political agenda, whether that was achieving home rule for Ireland or a totally separate Irish Republic.

The GAA, founded in 1884 in Thurles by Michael Cusack and Maurice Davin, undoubtedly contributed to the cultural revival of this period. The organisation aimed to promote Irish traditional games, while also expanding the game membership to more people, particularly the working class. At this time, the working class were excluded from the pre-existing English organisation; the AAA. Sunday games were forbidden, and only gentlemen could play. This excluded much of the population and prompted Cusack to establish the GAA with Davin. With esteemed athlete Davin as president, Cusach as secretary and Parnell, Davitt and Archbishop Croke as patrons, the Gaelic Athletic Association would prove a formidable element of the cultural revival.

One of the major contributions made by the GAA was in the promotion of Irish games. Games such as hurling and Gaelic football had been neglected. The rules, number of players and
duration of matches varied based on local traditions. Oftentimes, disputes over the rules would break. This could lead to riots and rowdiness which thus turned away respectable folk who instead participated in the English games, such as rugby soccer and cricket. The GAA gave order and discipline to the sports, albeit gradually. At the second meeting of the GAA, in Cork 1885, basic rules and regulations were installed (and spread afterwards by leaflets) around the country. It was decided that there should be one GAA club in each parish. A rule was introduced that meant members of the GAA were forbidden from participating in rival athletic organisation events. This rule was dropped in 1885 at the annual convention but reinstated after the IRB takeover of the organisation later. In 1887, the central council of the GAA was dominated by the IRB after Cusack was ousted from the organisation. A new rule banning RIC from the GAA made their stance clear, the organisation was nationalistic. The hostility towards British games and the police force isolated many Protestants and unionists from the movement. By 1893, the GAA had decided to keep sport and politics separate but still undoubtedly demonstrated their support for the Irish cultural revolution through their use of the Irish language and Irish-made cups and medals.

The other huge contribution made by the organisation was the patriotism and national identity it encouraged. The GAA spread rapidly with many pre-existing local athletic clubs switching their allegiance. By 1886, there were more there were 600 affiliated clubs. Intercounty matches, championships, leagues and athletic events promoted pride in one's parish. The GAA proved particularly successful in rural regions where social depression and emigration were prominent. Many clubs were named after national and Republican heroes, thus demonstrating their pride in Irish history. Even through very divisive issues and splits within the GAA, the organisation and movement managed to survive and grow steadily. The GAA also gave Irishmen an opportunity to run a national organisation; this gave them experience in democracy and financial management. Undoubtedly the national pride produced by the GAA had a huge impact on the Irish cultural revival.

The Gaelic League was established in 1893 by Eoin MacNeill, an expert in the Irish language. Its contribution to the cultural revival is huge. Its first president, Douglas Hyde, believed that the revival of the Irish language was a crucial step in the de-anglicisation of Irish society. The Irish language had gone into decline hugely after the famine; by 1901, only 14% of the population spoke Irish. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, English was the language of power as it was spoken by landlords, police, the courts and even nationalist leaders. Secondly, parents all wanted their children to learn English to grant them better prospects if they immigrated. Finally,
after the famine, Irish was associated with poverty and ignorance and as such, many middle and upper-class people in Ireland adopted English speaking mannerisms and accents as it was viewed as ‘more civilised’. The biggest contribution of the Gaelic League was that it removed the stigma associated with the language itself. Irish gained a respectable status through the campaigning of Hyde. In 1899 the Gaelic League vindicated Irish in the secondary school syllabus and St Patrick’s day was made a national holiday. On 1909, the organisation even succeeded in making Irish a compulsory subject for admission into the National University of Ireland. Through the preservation of Irish, people realised the richness of the language itself and the movement managed to attract scholars to the cultural revival.

A very tangible result of the Gaelic League’s contribution to the revival is the survival of the language. In 1897, there were 44 Gaelic League clubs in Ireland. By 1904, there were 600 scattered throughout the country. Through the organisation’s activities, they managed to promote the language in an effective and often fun way, while adding a strong sense of national identity. Ireland had its own beautiful language which its people could be proud of. Timire (travelling teachers) travelled the country giving free lessons so people could learn “cúpla focal”; This introduced many of the middle class the language. Social gatherings and exhibitions of Irish dancing and music encouraged many to get involved in the organisation and helped hugely to promote distinctively Irish customs, traditions and pastimes. The group’s newspaper, An Claideamh Soluis, published articles and stories which featured Irish poets and writers, such as Pádraig Pearse and Páraic Ó Conaire. This newspaper proved to be an excellent outlet for cultural nationalists to present ideas to the wider Irish population.

Finally, the Anglo-Irish literary revival contributed greatly to the cultural nationalism movement. Through the medium of English, its leaders WB Yeats, Lady Gregory and John Millington Synge aimed to reawaken Irish national consciousness and create an authentic Irish culture. Although written in English the literature produced would be distinctively Irish, inspired by Irish legends folklore, songs and life. The Anglo-Irish movement wanted an Irish free of class conflicts and religious division. They aimed to make the cultural revival open to all Irish men and women. The establishment of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1898 and the Abbey theatre in 1904 were crucial steps in which the public were introduced the rightwriters’ idea of what a modern Ireland should look like. ‘Cathleen Ní Houlihan’ was both a critical and commercial success which was a huge triumph for cultural nationalism. Despite its republican undertones, it demonstrated the wider Irish appetite for distinctively Irish literature.
It cannot be denied that the Anglo-Irish cultural movement challenged cultural nationalism in many ways, as well as what it meant to be Irish. This questioning was a huge contribution to cultural nationalism; it asked Irish people to decide what they wanted from the wider movement. The riots which resulted after Synge's 1907 'The Playboy of the Western World' demonstrated the divide between Irish people. Many nationalists felt the play was mocking Irish people because of the vernacular language used and the actions of the characters. They believed that Irish literature should be idealised propaganda for the nationalist cause. They wanted the poems, plays and novels produced to encourage Irish pride and self-reliance. Meanwhile, the creators behind the work wanted to produce work which could be taken seriously in Europe and would question Irish attitudes and life. While producing literature that was deeply inspired by Ireland, the Anglo-Irish literary revival also questioned the direction of cultural nationalism and the vision for the future of Ireland.

The contribution of the GAA, the Gaelic League and the Anglo-Irish literary revival was colossal to the cultural rival of 1980 to 1914. Through promoting pride in Irish culture, customs and traditions, important questions were raised about what kind of Ireland people wanted to live in. Through IRB infiltration and interference in each of the movements, their individual aims were often distorted. In the GAA, the IRB takeover led to ban on players playing foreign games which lasted until the 1970s. This created a divide between those who were “anglicised” and those who were Irish. The Gaelic League was established by Hyde to be an apolitical and ecumenical movement. However, it also infiltrated by the IRB and Hyde’s vision was destroyed. Unionist and Protestants felt alienated and excluded from the movement as it became increasingly clear the cultural nationalism was only applicable to nationalist Catholics. Finally, through the Anglo-Irish literary movement aimed to show Irish people as real, human and flawed. However, the extremism of some nationalists became clear as the movement progressed. An Irishman was to be honest, humble, Godfearing and hardworking, and anything else was not tolerable. But despite these failings, the cultural revival’s aims, to create a cultural that was distinctively Irish was achieved. These movements bred many of the 1916 Rising’s heroes who felt in love with Ireland through attending events organised by these groups in their youth.